

# O ut, Darned Spot!

IMAGINE BEING SWEET SIXTEEN. In the mirror you see a brown birthmark that engulfs your neck, shoulders, and back, and the scars where doctors tried to fix it with skin grafts. Swimsuit season is around the corner, and the thought is terrifying.

Or think of a baby boomer whose forearms bear the frivolity of his youth: tattoos. "Born to be Wild" is bad enough, but "I Love Rebecca" is downright embarrassing, especially when your wife's name is Sue.

Maybe you're retired, having lived all your life with a port wine stain covering half your face. Sure, you've learned to accept it. But you still have that dream where it miraculously disappears.

Dreams do come true. Pulsed laser systems are a relatively new treatment for people who want to get rid of birthmarks, tattoos, port wine stains, spider veins, freckles, even aging spots and discoloration from scarring.

Until recently, problems like these required traditional surgery, or more often surgeries, with hospitalization, anesthesia, and skin grafts that themselves left scars. Today, pigmentations can be lightened and often removed with an inexpensive, in-office laser treatment performed without anesthesia, and the risk of scarring is minimal.

The pencil-like laser emits a tiny, powerful pulse of light, affecting primarily pigmented tissue while leaving normal skin alone. It may leave the area red and feeling slightly sunburned, but it returns to normal within two to four weeks.

Michael J. Breiner, MD, one of several plastic surgeons at Methodist, has successfully treated a number of people with the pulsed laser system. He is sitting with a young girl whose birthmark covers most of her back.

"It feels sort of like the snap of a rubber band," he tells her, demonstrating the laser on his wrist. When she is ready, he

restrictive," he explains. "A blue and green tattoo does not respond to the same wavelength as a light brown birthmark, so a doctor using one laser would be limited to its range of applications."

Today, laser equipment is compact and portable, which means doctors like Breiner can lease units when they need them. This makes it affordable



Patti Bonham

treats several areas of the birthmark, each about half an inch in diameter, each with a different "test dose" of the laser. In four weeks she'll come back, and Breiner will determine which dose worked best. He estimates it will take about 20 minutes to erase the entire thing.

Later, he spends about three minutes erasing tattoos from a man's forearms. As he works, he tells his patient to use a topical antibiotic and a bandage. The patient straightens his necktie and leaves. He'll return in four weeks for follow-up, although the majority of these "surgeries" are completed in one office visit.

Laser surgery isn't really new, Breiner says, just different.

"In the past, room-sized laser systems were expensive and

to offer laser treatments for pigment problems that run across the entire color spectrum as long as the patients are grouped accordingly.

Breiner cautions that not everyone is a candidate for laser treatment. He doesn't recommend it for any lesion or discoloration where cancer is suspected, because the laser obliterates the tissue and leaves nothing for biopsy. And lasers work best on superficial pigment problems, so while spider veins respond well to the laser, varicose veins do not.

But many people can be treated. Over 60 percent of all Americans have some form of unwanted pigmentation, and now they can do more than just dream about making it go away. ♦

—MARILYN LEWIS